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The effect of sexism and rape myths on victim blame

Chiara Rollero, Stefano Tartaglia

Department of Psychology, University of Turin, Turin – Italy

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to:

Chiara Rollero

Department of Psychology

Via Verdi 10 – 10124 Torino – Italy

Phone +39 011 6702534

Email: chiara.rollero@unito.it

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Abstract

Rape myths are false beliefs about sexual violence that encourage blaming the victim and exonerating the offender. Within the framework of the Ambivalent Sexism Theory, we tested a model investigating the effect of each dimension of ambivalent sexism on the endorsement of each rape myth, and in turn the effect of each myth on the attribution of responsibility (to the perpetrator versus to the victim) in case of sexual violence. Participants were 264 students (54.9% females). Results showed that hostile sexism toward women fostered the endorsement of each myth, whereas benevolence toward men enhanced the myth 'He didn't mean to' and this increased the perception of the victim's responsibility. Implications in developing interventions to de-construct rape myths are discussed.

Male-to-female sexual violence is neither infrequent nor inconsequential and rape represents the most serious assault on women's rights (Canto, Perles, & San Martin, 2014). In the United States a nationally representative survey found that approximately one in five women affirmed having been raped (Black et al., 2011). Across the 28 Member States of the European Union one in ten women has experienced some form of sexual violence since the age of 15, and one in 20 has been raped (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014). Although these high rates, the experience of rape remains systematically under-reported to authorities for several reasons, but the key point is the extent to which women identify their experience as rape and recognise that rape is a crime (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014).

One of the most significant factors that contribute to the perception of rape lies in rape myths, defined as false beliefs about rape that encourage blaming the victim and exonerating the offender (Bohner et al., 1998; Burt, 1980). In other words, rape myths function as a mechanism where victims are accused for their victimization (Ryan, 2011). Even if over the past 40 years rape myths that blatantly blame women have become less socially acceptable and tolerable, many of the beliefs that women did something to cause the assault and that is not totally the offender's fault are still present but in more subtle expressions (Hockett, Saucier, & Badke, 2016; Saucier, Strain, Hockett, & McManus, 2015). According to McMahon and Farmer (2011), common rape myths are four: She asked for it, He didn't mean to, It wasn't really rape, and She lied. The myth She asked for it emphasises the victim's responsibility for rape, considering that her behaviour has invited sexual assault. The dimension He didn't mean to reflects the belief that the perpetrator did not actually intend to rape. The third myth, It wasn't really rape, denies that a sexual assault happened either blaming the victim (who did not physically resist or fight back) or justifying the offender. Finally, the myth She lied reflects the disbelief of rape claims, assuming that the victim fabricated the assault.

Although both genders adhere to these ideas, several studies have shown that men are more likely to accept rape myths than women (Canto et al., 2014; Emmers-Sommer, 2017; Hammond, Berry, & Rodriguez, 2011; McMahon & Farmer, 2011; Powers, Leili, Hagman, Cohn, 2015; Suarez & Gadalla,

2010; Vonderhaar & Carmody, 2015). Women have also been found to respond to victims more empathetically and less likely to engage in victim blaming than men (Grubb & Harrower, 2008).

Rape myths are related to additional beliefs, especially to those regarding gender roles. As Burt (1980) argued, “rape attitudes are strongly connected to other deeply held and pervasive attitudes such as sex role stereotyping” (p. 229). For this reason, a relevant focus of research on the link between rape myths acceptance and other ideological beliefs has been the endorsement of sexist attitudes (Abrams, Viki, Masser, & Bohner, 2003; Canto et al., 2014; Chapleau, Oswald, & Russell, 2007; Yamawaki, 2007).

The Theory of Ambivalent Sexism and rape myths acceptance

Challenging the equation of prejudice with antipathy in reference to sexism, Glick and Fiske presented the Theory of Ambivalent Sexism (1996, 1999, 2001). According to these authors, because of the basic structure of traditional male-female relationships, in which a power differentiation coexists with a strong interdependence between the groups, sexist attitudes encompass considerable ambivalence on the part of each sex toward the other. Glick and Fiske (1996, 1999) define this phenomenon as “ambivalent sexism”. Specifically, the Theory of Ambivalent Sexism posits that: a) men are accorded more power and status than women; b) men and women are differentiated for their social roles and traits; and c) relations between men and women are conditioned by sexual reproduction and intimacy. These three factors, called respectively patriarchy, gender differentiation, and sexual reproduction, create both hostile and benevolent attitudes toward the other sex (Glick & Fiske, 1996, 1999 2001). In respect to women, hostile sexism (HS) is an adversarial view of gender relations in which women are perceived as seeking to control men and usurping men’s power. Benevolent sexism (BS) idealizes women as pure creatures who ought to be protected, supported and whose love is necessary to make a man complete, but it implies that women are weak and best suited for conventional gender roles. Hostility toward men (HM) expresses resentment toward male dominance and the ways in which men exert control within intimate relationships. Benevolence

toward men (BM) represents subjectively positive attitudes rooted in traditional admiration for men's role as protectors and providers, but also the belief that men require women to provide domestic, maternal care (e.g., tending to men at home).

Research grounded in this theoretical framework suggests that people who endorse sexist attitudes have a higher myth acceptance than those who do not, as individuals with a more traditional conception of gender roles are more likely to blame the victim for the sexual assault than women and men who hold more non-traditional views (Abrams et al., 2003; Canto et al., 2014; Chapleau et al., 2007). In their study about the effect of ambivalent sexism toward women, Abrams and colleagues (2003) found that participants who were high in benevolent sexism were more likely to blame the victim of an acquaintance rape than were low benevolent sexism individuals. The woman in that situation was perceived by benevolent sexists as transgressing relevant gender norms, and thus as deserving blame. In contrast, hostile sexism seemed to function as a means to rationalize sexual violence (e.g., the woman wanted sex), as the authors found a significant relationship between rape proclivity and hostile sexism (Abrams et al., 2003). Similar results were obtained by Canto and colleagues (2014) in a research on the predictive role of sexism toward women on rape myths acceptance. Specifically, they found that HS was a very strong predictor of acceptance in both genders and BS was also a predictor of acceptance in women.

The current study

Within the framework of the Ambivalent Sexism Theory, the purpose of the present study was to extend past research on sexism and rape myths acceptance on victim blame. First, we consider sexist attitudes toward both genders (past research has tended to use on only HS and BS) as predictive of myths acceptance. Second, we investigate the effect of each dimension of sexism on each rape myth (past research has tended to consider rape myths acceptance as unidimensional, although its multidimensional conceptualisation). Third, we test the effects of each rape myth on the attribution of responsibility in case of sexual violence.

Specifically we hypothesise that:

(a) Sexist attitudes towards both men and women would increase the acceptance of the rape myths (Abrams et al., 2003; Canto et al., 2014; Chapleau et al., 2003).

(b) Rape myths acceptance would increase blaming the victim and justifying the offender (Hammond et al., 2011; McMahon & Farmer, 2011; Powers et al., 2015; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010; Vonderhaar & Carmody, 2015).

Method

Procedure

The participants read a rape vignette describing a story of a woman who went to a party where she met and got acquainted with a man. Later that night she invited him to her apartment, where, after she had kissed him first, he subsequently raped her. This scenario was used in a previous experimental study investigating the role of sexism in victim blame (Abrams et al., 2003)¹. After reading the vignette, participants were asked to fill a questionnaire.

Participants

Data were collected in Italy. The study enrolled 264 Caucasian students from two public universities of Turin attending courses in the Arts and Sciences Schools. For their degree thesis, one undergraduate in Psychology contacted other students from all the faculties of the Universities. 43.1% of the participants were males and 54.9% females. The average age of the sample was 23.09 years ($SD = 3.84$). The participation to the study was voluntary. The anonymity was guaranteed.

Measures

We collected data by means of a self-reported questionnaire taking approximately 20 minutes to complete. The instrument included the following measures:

1. *Evaluation of the scenario* (Abrams et al., 2003). Three items investigated the opinions concerning the story read by participants. The first one asked “Do you think a crime has been committed?” (possible answer: Yes or No). The other two items asked how much the man and woman in the story were responsible of what happened. Participants rated their answer on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from Not at all responsible (0) to Completely responsible (4).
2. *The short version of the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory* (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 1996; Rollero, Glick, & Tartaglia, 2014) including 12 items measuring Hostile sexism toward women (6 items, Cronbach’s $\alpha=.85$) and Benevolent sexism toward women (6 items, $\alpha=.78$). The items were rated on a 6-point point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (0) to strongly agree (5).
3. *The short version of the Ambivalence Toward Men Inventory* (AMI; Glick & Fiske, 1999; Rollero et al., 2014) measuring Hostile sexism toward men (6 items, $\alpha=.78$) and Benevolent sexism toward men (6 items, $\alpha=.84$). The items were rated on a 6-point point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (0) to strongly agree (5).
4. *The Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale* (IRMA) (McMahon & Farmer, 2011). The 22 items of the scale belong to four subscales measuring the acceptance of four rape myths, She asked for it (6 items, $\alpha=.80$), He didn’t mean to (6 items, $\alpha=.67$), It wasn’t really rape (5 items, $\alpha=.65$), She lied (5 items, $\alpha=.83$). The items were rated on a 5-point point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).
5. A brief list of socio-demographic items (i.e. gender, age).

Data analysis

We performed descriptive statistics for the variables investigated comparing men and women. Then we verified the hypothesised relations via structural equation modelling.

Results

Descriptive statistics

The overwhelming majority of the participants answered that the vignette described a crime (90%). The man ($M = 3.53$; $SD = .96$) was valued more responsible than the woman ($M = 1.58$; $SD = 1.19$). However, male participants judged the woman more responsible than did female participants. On the contrary, compared with males, females considered the man more responsible (see Table 1). Both differences were significant, the effect sizes were small.

Table 2 shows means and standard deviations of the subscales of ASI, AMI, and IRMA separated by gender and the t values of the means comparisons. In general, sexist attitudes toward women were higher than the ones toward men. Comparing males and females, both groups were more sexist toward the opposite group. Male participants were significantly higher in hostility toward women (large effect size) and benevolence toward men (medium effect size) whereas female participants were higher in hostility toward men (small effect size). Concerning the rape myths acceptance, the men showed higher scores in all the subscales (medium effect sizes).

Table 3 shows the correlations between the subscales. As expected, all the subscales were correlated.

Testing the model

To verify our hypotheses, we tested a structural equations model assuming that (a) Being female should influence all the sexist attitudes except benevolence toward women (because of the preliminary analyses); (b) Sexist attitudes should increase the acceptance of the rape myths; and (c) Rape myths acceptance should foster the attribution of responsibility to the woman and decrease the attribution to the man. We used a partial disaggregating approach (Bagozzi, 1993; Bagozzi & Edwards, 1998) randomly aggregating all the items of ASI, AMI, and IRMA in two indicators for each scale. The aggregating of items reduces the number of variables in the model that may lead to a significant worsening of the fit, but still allows for an estimation of the measure error of the latent

variables. As recommended, we tested the model fit using different indexes (Hu and Bentler, 1998). The first model tested was promising, having good fit indexes: $\chi^2(116) = 221.47$ $p < .01$; $\chi^2/\text{gdl} = 1.91$; CFI = .96; TLI = .93; RMSEA = .059. Nevertheless, because some paths were not significant, we modified the model. The second model was satisfactory, and all the parameters were statistically significant: $\chi^2(132) = 236.66$, $p < .01$; $\chi^2/\text{gdl} = 1.79$; CFI = .96; TLI = .94; RMSEA = .055. Figure 1 shows the model in graphic form. We found that (a) Being female decreased hostile sexism toward women ($\beta = -.40$), and benevolent sexism toward men ($\beta = -.26$), but increased hostility toward men ($\beta = .22$); (b) hostile sexism toward women increased the acceptance of each rape myth (β ranging from .28 to .82) and benevolence toward men increased the acceptance of the myth “He didn’t mean to” ($\beta = .38$); (c) the acceptance of the myth “She asked for it” increased the attribution of responsibility to the woman ($\beta = .86$) and decreased the attribution to the man ($\beta = -.45$) and the acceptance of the myth “He didn’t mean to” decreased the attribution of responsibility to the woman ($\beta = -.33$). The model explained 44% of the variance of responsibility attribution to the woman and 20% of the variance of responsibility attribution to the man.

Discussion

Within the Ambivalent Sexism Theory framework, the present study aimed at extending past research on victim blaming in case of rape. We proposed a model investigating the effect of each dimension of ambivalent sexism on the endorsement of each rape myth, and in turn the effect of each myth on the attribution of responsibility in case of sexual violence. In general, results confirmed the hypothesised effect, but showed specificities that deserve attention.

Concerning sexist attitudes, only one dimension of ambivalent sexism increased the acceptance of each rape myth, i.e. hostility toward women, which was higher in men than in women. Participants who expressed a more explicit adversarial view of the female gender appeared to be more likely to believe in rape myths. Moreover, benevolence toward men, that was again higher in men than in women, enhanced the only myth referred to the role played by men, i.e., He didn’t mean to, which

reflects the idea that the perpetrator did not actually intend to rape. In other words, an explicit hostile attitude toward women encompasses the endorsement of all the rape myths, whereas benevolence toward men weakens the offender's fault. These findings are in line with literature that has largely showed many pernicious effects of sexism (e.g., Barreto & Ellemers, 2005; Canto et al., 2014; Fedi & Rollero, 2016), but they also underline the necessity of differentiating the dimensions of ambivalent sexism. Indeed, if it is well established that benevolence and hostility toward both men and women are a complementary set of gender-traditional stereotypes which reinforce the status quo (Glick et al., 2004), more attention should be paid to the role each dimension can play in foster victim blaming and offender's justification in case of rape. As the Theory of Ambivalent Sexism posits, the analysis of the structural underpinnings of sexist attitudes can help in detecting the complexities of gender relations, especially the perils of "positive" prejudice toward both sexes (Glick & Fiske, 2011).

Partially in contrast with hypotheses, two rape myths did not influence the responsibility attribution. This might have happened because such myths were those focused on the disbelief of rape, i.e., It wasn't really rape and She lied. We can argue that when individuals deny that a sexual assault occurred, the attribution of responsibility does not represent a relevant matter of fact. On the contrary, the myth She asked for it, based on the idea that the victim's behaviour has invited sexual violence, encouraged the attribution to the woman and decreased the perception of the man's responsibility. This is the myth that emphasises most the victim's responsibility for rape, suggesting that the woman wanted sex and thus caused the assault. Finally, the myth He didn't mean to reduced the perception of the victim's responsibility. Although this datum can appear surprising, it may be interpreted in relation to the emphasis on the perpetrator: focusing on men, either as rapists or as guiltless, reduces the perception of women as agentic and thus as responsible. However, since this study represents the first attempt to investigate rape myths acceptance as a multidimensional construct, further research is needed to strengthen this interpretation.

The data from this study can provide useful considerations for professionals working in the field of education and prevention. Specifically, these insights can be used in developing programs to increase knowledge of sexual violence and de-construct rape myths, in line with recent projects that operate on an ecological model of sexual violence (Bedera & Nordmeyer, 2015; Powers et al., 2015). Interventions and gender violence prevention programs should consider the key role of hostility toward women and benevolence toward men, that reinforces and enhances the support of rape myths. These programs should involve contents aimed at eliminating such sexist attitudes. This study presents some limitations which can be considered as recommendation for future research. First, the study sample represents only university students. Future research should investigate the replicability of these findings with other adults using community samples. Another limitation was that this study did not in-depth investigate how sexist beliefs and rape-related attitudes may affect motivations to help potential targets of rape or to report violence to authorities. Future studies should explore such processes in order to develop effective gender violence prevention programs. Finally, the present research was focused on violence within heterosexual relationships. Since lesbians are victims of sexual violence to a greater extent than heterosexual women are (Walters, Chen, & Breiding, 2013), research should consider the potential role of rape myths when the perpetrator is female. However, despite the above described limitations, it is hoped that the present results can contribute to a better understanding of the processes underlying victim blame in case of sexual violence and thus to a successful approach to fight them. As Aronowitz and colleagues (2012) argued, due to the prevalence of sexual violence and data indicating that sexual assault can have a long-term impact on victim's psychological functioning, the prevention of sexual assault needs to be a priority.

Footnotes

¹ We used the scenario of Abrams and colleagues (Abrams, et al. 2003) translated in Italian. The original scenario was described as follows:

Jason and Kathy met and got acquainted at a party thrown by a mutual friend. Since they had a lot in common, they spent the night laughing, dancing, talking and flirting with each other. At the end of the party, Kathy invited Jason over to her apartment to talk some more and have coffee. When they got to her room, Kathy started kissing and caressing Jason. Jason then grabbed Kathy and tried to take her clothes off in order to have sex with her. At this point Kathy pushed him away and asked him to stop. However, Jason did not listen to her, and instead used force to hold her down and eventually penetrated her.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

No funding was received for this study.

The authors Chiara Rollero and Stefano Tartaglia declare that they have no conflict of interest.

All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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Table 1. Attribution of responsibility. Differences between men (n=119) and women (n=145): Mean scores, t values, and effect sizes (Cohen's d).

	Mean scores			
	Men	Women	t	d
Attribution of responsibility to the woman	1.81	1.39	2.83**	0.36
Attribution of responsibility to the man	3.35	3.67	-2.71**	0.33

** p<.01; * p<.05

Table 2. Sexism and Rape myths acceptance. Differences between men (n=119) and women (n=145): Mean scores, t values, and effect sizes (Cohen's d).

	Mean scores		t	d
	Men	Women		
ASI				
Hostile sexism	2.44	1.54	6.63**	0.82
Benevolent sexism	2.33	2.10	1.54	0.19
AMI				
Hostility toward men	2.00	2.32	-2.42*	0.30
Benevolence toward men	2.03	1.37	4.69**	0.59
IRMA				
She asked for it	2.17	1.65	5.85**	0.73
He didn't mean to	2.24	1.82	5.16**	0.63
It wasn't really rape	1.81	1.38	6.39**	0.77
She lied	2.44	1.89	5.43**	0.68

** p<.01; * p<.05

Table 3. Correlations between scales.

	ASI		AMI		IRMA		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
ASI							
1. Hostile sexism							
2. Benevolent sexism	.40**						
AMI							
3. Hostility toward men	.33**	.46**					
4. Benevolence toward men	.66**	.60**	.43**				
IRMA							
5. She asked for it	.64**	.34**	.24**	.57**			
6. He didn't mean to	.47**	.37**	.22**	.49**	.58**		
7. It wasn't really rape	.49**	.22**	.17**	.40**	.58**	.47**	
8. She lied	.58**	.25**	.20**	.47**	.64**	.50**	.55**

** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$